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On Prayer

John 14:1-15

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This morning I want to try to get your attention. I want to say some pretty simple things that get very distorted in our Christian life, and so I want to be as clear as possible.

We all live in a culture. We are Americans. We take pride in our economy, pride in our nation. Yet, this culture in which we live is like the following parable.

There was a people who lived in a place where a heavy morning fog developed each night and stayed in place all morning. As they drove from this spot to that spot, the people could see a bit farther here or there, but the fog was still present. Eventually, they got used to the fog, got used to how far they could see, and adjusted their driving to accommodate the weather. It only made sense. These people wanted to be safe, so they learned how to slow down. They made new rules to govern traffic patterns, at least for the morning hours. By midday, the fog dissipated, but the rules of the road, the rules of their lives, persisted, because they were good rules, and after all, they would need them again in the morning. Though they had sunlight from midday until dark, they kept their fog-rules because they were rules they had made, and because these rules kept them safe.

I believe we are like the people in this parable because most of us think we can figure out a reasonable way to be Christians. We forget about the cultural fog and the rules that were established for us long ago, and tell ourselves we can adapt our newfound or old-found faith in Jesus Christ to the cultural milieu in which we live, a culture of suburban affluence, a culture of secular humanism, a culture of emotional immaturity, a society in regression. I am here this morning to remind you that if you above all want to be safe, you're going to have a problem with Jesus.

At the beginning of John 14 the disciples are feeling some shock. They were reeling from the very disturbing news Jesus just revealed - that Peter may *say* he is going to lay down his life for Jesus, but in fact, Peter will soon disown Jesus three times. It had been a difficult time, for Jesus had washed all their feet, and told them there was a betrayer in their midst. We all know that the betrayer was Judas, but none of us knows for sure why Judas betrayed Jesus. Perhaps for money, perhaps to motivate Jesus to take up arms and lead a Zealot army against the Romans. We don't really know. But we can surmise that Judas didn't get it - that he wasn't willing to go the distance, that what Jesus asked of him was simply too much, that his fears overpowered his willingness to follow. At some level, Judas decided to play it safe.

So rash Peter decides to declare his unswerving loyalty to Jesus. But Peter doesn't get it either, not really, at least, not yet. Judas decides not to follow Jesus, in fact, to actively work against him. Peter decides to blindly follow Jesus and commit to something he can't complete. Don't you agree there's safety in following? Jesus is careful here. He knows a truth about human

nature, that there is functionally no difference between the person who would deify you and the person who would crucify you, that either of these two people lack a clear sense of who they are. People who are uncomfortable with themselves try to live out their lives in someone else, and make that someone else responsible for them. And people who are uncomfortable with themselves don't get it either - they can't understand the gig - both Judas and Peter were *reacting* to Jesus, *not listening* to what he was saying. Neither Judas nor Peter were acting out of a sense of self, nor were either of them following God.

So, as chapter 14 begins, Jesus seeks to comfort all of his disciples, who were in some shock at the rebuke Jesus gave Peter. They were saying to themselves that what Peter said about laying down his life was what they wished they could have said. So Jesus comforts them with words about the mansion with many rooms, that he going to prepare a place for them. Very comforting words indeed.

Then it's the turn of Thomas not to get it. Thomas takes Jesus literally, but wants Jesus to make it all even more clear. Thomas wants point-to-point directions, so he won't get lost. He too wants to be protected - and safe.

And Jesus responds to Thomas - and to the whole group - and to us - by saying that he is the way and the truth and the life. Jesus says, 'Follow Me.' Jesus puts it out there. As usual, he doesn't really answer the question put to him, because the question Thomas asks really isn't that relevant. Jesus didn't come down here to answer our questions. Jesus came here to reconcile us to God - and through God, to one another. And the only way for that to happen is from the inside out, with God doing the reconstruction. We have to follow his way and his truth and his life. We don't get to play it safe. The only choice here is whether to follow Jesus. Jesus is really quite clear. Choose my way that is truth and my life OR choose your culture, which promises safety, but please, Jesus is saying, don't confuse the two, and don't insult what I am trying to say by meeting me half-way.

Next, Philip jumps in and tells Jesus he also doesn't get it. Philip wants Jesus to show them the Father. Jesus looks at Philip quizzically - 'Philip, if you have seen me, you have seen the Father.' But, of course, that *is* the problem, with Philip and Thomas and Peter and Judas. They haven't really *seen* Jesus. They've been with him, they've hung out, they've been on the coattails, they've been groupies, but they haven't got it, that this is a *new* thing, a thing that works itself from the inside out. They are still trying to get Jesus to fit into their categories, into their world, into their culture, into their sense of what's safe. They want to grow but they want to set their own limit on how much they grow, but with Jesus that's just *not* how it works. Sorry! You go this human-made way and your growth gets stunted. I know a lot of people who are right here.

Jesus tells them, clearly, that anyone who has faith in him will do what he has been doing, and whatever anyone asks in his name, will be granted so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. Life, birth, today's sunset and tomorrow's sunrise, are all miracles. So is praying with someone and believing that God can and will bring healing to cancer. Or raising someone from the dead. There is *no* wall separating these miracles. *None whatsoever*.

Prayer* is speaking to God in a way that respects who God is. It is asking God to change us from the inside out. It is asking God to put before us a challenge to follow. It is standing against the fog. It is not adapting to the culture. It is a willingness to be made into a New Man or a New Woman. It is asking for the moon and expecting to receive the moon, *all the time.

Prayer is taking Jesus seriously because you know what he is asking of you. Prayer shapes the future. It's a complete 'miss' to think you are praying in Jesus' name if you simply end a prayer with the word 'Jesus.' *When* you get it, you pray with a realistic congruence that's connected to the person who bears the name. Prayer with Jesus is connected to carrying forward the work Jesus did - all of it, not just the comfortable interpretations of it.

And *that* means personal evangelism, sharing your faith not only in actions but in words, guiding your next door neighbor towards the place where she or he might confess with lips that Jesus Christ is Lord. That means healing ministry, where people and the their places of being broken are repaired - physically, emotionally, spiritually. That means a recognition of the reality of demons and the willingness to engage them and cast them out in the name of Jesus Christ. *These are the things Jesus did*. These are the things he says we will do if we have faith in him.

Prayer is getting God's vision for God's church. I don't know all of what God's vision will be for CPC, but I know enough of what God wants, to be able to say that he won't be pleased with half-formed, half-baked, half-hearted, half-learned, half the distance obedience. Jesus Christ wants this church to make a difference. He wants every person to get it. He wants every person deeply and profoundly in prayer. He wants you to pursue excellence in what you do. And he doesn't want you to adapt to the fog or make nice with the affluent, polite, humanistic culture that has defined Vacaville for the 110 years since its incorporation.

I believe that what Jesus is saying to Judas, Peter, Thomas, Philip, to all of them *and* to all of us, is that we *can't* figure out a reasonable way to be Christians. This faith we profess to believe was foolishness to the Greeks, a wayward sect to the Jews. People in every culture try to change it to make it more comfortable. But it never works out. If you want to be a Christian, you have to want *what* the Christ wants, and he tells us here what he wants. He wants us to do what he has been doing.

You think I am wrong? I'm open to hearing why. You think I am right? Then quit playing it safe, and *be the church* that is light and power, that does the work Jesus did, and that doesn't put up with anything but excellence because excellence honors God. Prayer is always more an exercise in listening than talking. Jesus is on the phone. He wants you to follow. He wants to make you new from the inside out. Are you going to take the call?

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